Are Social Forums the Future of Social Movements?

PETER MARCUSE

A century ago, class issues seemed to be the organizing focus of progressive struggles in most of the world. Since the end of the second world war, the terrain of struggle seems to have changed: anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, identity issues including ethnic, racial, gender issues, and urban social mobilizations around ‘collective consumption’, which might include everything from anti-urban renewal, anti-displacement, anti-gentrification, anti-privatization and public service issues, and more recently alternative-globalization

protests, have all at various times seemed the successor to class struggles — although class continued to play a key role in many of them. Some of the literature (e.g. Castells) focused the discussion on ‘urban’ movements, although redefining that term; world-wide, progressive struggles today are at least as much rurally-based, if with urban connections, as they are city-oriented. If ‘urban’ is considered in the sense Castells (1972) put it forward, as the sphere of collective consumption, it would indeed remain a central component of progressive struggles; but then it would also need to be linked to issues in the sphere of production.

Are social forums, in the line begun with the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, picking up on the Seattle protest of 1999, the successor and culmination of these struggles? (We should be clear that the ‘forums’ sponsored by the United Nations, e.g. the World Urban Forum taking place as this is being written in Barcelona, or the World Conference against Racism in Durban, or the Habitat sessions, are of an entirely different order, and if anything are in the lineage of the Round Tables of Germany in the 1990s or earlier corporatist forms of governance.)

Four World Social Forums have now taken place: three in Porto Alegre, Brazil, with the support of the Workers Party government of that city and its province, and one in Mumbai, India, again with some, if limited, governmental support. In each case, Attac was probably the best-organized international organization involved in the planning, but the planning committees included a broad range of both grass-roots and advocacy groups, and some labor unions; in each case, third-world residents were the dominant attendees (South American in the Porto Alegre case, Indian in Mumbai). Parallel meetings of political figures accompanied each, but politicians were not allowed as keynote speakers (the exception being Lula in Porto Alegre). US and first-world attendance in general was small at first, but grew with successive Forums. The guiding themes of each circled around alternative forms of globalization (both phrased negatively — not this globalization — and positively — the theme of the second was Another World is Possible) and anti-corporate positions, but included presentations of a broad range of cultural, economic, identity and political issues. In all three cases, there

1 Sometimes labeled ‘anti-globalization’ but that, as Patrick Bond and many others have pointed out, is a deceptive misnomer: it is really-existing globalization that is being opposed; it is an alternative, better form of globalization, not no globalization, that is wanted. Bettina Köhler and Markus Wissen (2003: 943) make the same point.

2 I thank Janet Conway for pointing out it is four, not three, as in the original draft of this article. I was only able to attend two.
was a deliberate decision not to attempt a formal statement of principles or strategy, and to make the meetings open, with a maximum of interchange of information, experiences, proposals, analyses, debates. In the last of the three, in Mumbai, the decision was made to try to organize regional Social Forums in anticipation of the next world one, and indeed regional forums have now been held in several countries. No hierarchically constituted organization has been formed, but there is a steering committee of some 60 members that meets as the occasion demands.

The recently completed Boston Social Forum (23–25 July 2004), organized in the tradition of these earlier world and regional forums, provided an opportunity for reflection on the future of such forums. Held at the end of the week preceding the meeting of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in the same city, it was deliberately not held to coincide with that event — several unions stated firmly they did not want a ‘counter-convention’ to compete with the one supporting Kerry. But timing seemed propitious: media attention was on the city because of the DNC. The organizing committee was put together very informally and openly; only representatives of ‘real’ organizations were included, ‘real’ being pragmatically defined as contributing to the Forum either in money, labor, or in kind. Policy matters were decided by consensus; organizational/administrative matters, where necessary, by majority vote. The bulk of funding came from registration fees: the Ford Foundation provided further funding to an ad hoc group organized for the occasion, Grass-roots Global Justice. Thirty-one tracks ended up being constituted as the organizational device for arranging the more than 600 panels that constituted the Forum. At least three proposals for panels from three different organizations were asked as a prerequisite for forming a track; the only exception was a track on gay rights, a very recent but very hot topic, particularly in Massachusetts where the Supreme court had ruled that denying gays and lesbians the right to marry violated the state constitution. About 1,000 persons attended the three large ‘convocations’, one each day, to hear speakers such as Walden Bello, Jim Hightower, Maude Barlow, Angela Davis and Robert Reich. The American Friends Service Committee helped substantially in planning, and particularly in making it possible for overseas guests to attend. Total registration for the Forum was just over 1,000.

The BSF described itself as:

not a platform, not an organization, but an ‘open space’... a meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experience and interlinking for effective action by groups and movements... committed to building a society centered on the human person... The goals of the event are simple: encourage various social movements to exchange information, network with one another, form new alliances, and push our movements forward a bit more towards the next stage of our development.

The Forum was of course not a completely ‘open’ space. The phrase ‘committed to building a society centered on the human person’ is in fact a very summary statement

3 For links to most of these, see www.nycsocialforum.org/nycsf.html. They include European Social Forums in Italy, France, and a forthcoming one in London in October 2004.
4 See www.bostonsocialforum.org.
5 The New York ‘seed group’ has even looser conditions for membership: ‘In order to be a part of the Seed Group, members have to state to the group their intent to join the seed group and attend at least two consecutive meetings, and show a willingness to participate in a respectful fashion. They then have decision making power (and will be listed on the web site as seed group participant groups). Observers are always welcome at meetings but do not have decision making power’ (www.nycsocialforum.org/nycsf.html).
6 The tracks become relevant for Suggestion no. 2 at the end of this paper (see Appendix for details and www.fse-esf.org/en/esf.shtml?x=906&als[SSECTION]=Programme). The fifth World Social Forum will apparently be organized along eleven ‘thematic terrains’ (www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/noticias_01.asp?cd_news=1178).
7 See www.bostonsocialforum.org/content.php?content.4.
of a shared set of interests, values and approaches. When the United Nations sponsors a World Urban Forum, as it is about to do in Barcelona, it is indeed (at least in theory) open to all points of view; it is open to anyone interested in its subject-matter, regardless of from what point of view. Not so with the Social Forums; they are forums for those benefiting least from (or hurt by) the prevailing economic, social, and political structures of contemporary societies, just as the World Economic Forum is a forum for those benefiting most from those structures. All the participants understand this, and, while a formal statement of the glue that binds the Social Forums together might be desirable (or might not; the inevitable level of generality and the difficulties of precise formulation may not be worth their cost), it is hardly needed in practice.

The Boston Social Forum as such will cease to exist, although the organizers hope to pass on the accumulated wisdom, software, contact lists, etc., to future Forums. And indeed there are already plans for Social Forums in New York City (three initial ones, small in scale, have already been held there) and Connecticut, and a United States Social Forum is in process of being organized, although the organizational process, because of the commitment to openness and inclusivity, is progressing slowly, and while the target date is 2005, it might not take place till 2006. For the US national Forum, Jobs with Justice seems to be playing much the same role (leading broad grass-roots organization) that Attac played in the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre.8

A panel on the last day of the Forum assessed some of its strengths and weaknesses, and raised some of the difficult questions it had grappled with. In what follows, the questions raised at the panel are set forth, and then put in the context of the broader debates about social movements, but the actual discussions were necessarily more limited than what is discussed below, and the Comments on each are strictly mine, often at variance with what seemed the consensus of the group.

1 The biggest single criticism was the lack of direct participation by grass-roots people. Everyone considered more involvement very desirable. One of the organizers of the Seattle demonstration argued that those most directly involved — e.g. the very poor, people on welfare, were not that directly interested at the level at which many of the issues were being addressed; whether that was a matter of ‘education’ or of immediate and more pressing concerns was debated. At the Boston Forum, the greatest success in grass-roots involvement had been with immigrant groups, where the connections were indeed immediate; much information and literature was available in Spanish as well as English. And there was an anti-poverty track.

Comment: At one level, the issue is an age-old one, dealing with the role of intellectuals, the importance of leadership vs the desire for direct democracy, historically the role of ‘the party.’ Perhaps the appropriate formulation is to maintain a high priority for involvement of grass-roots people, both with formal and real openness to their participation and maximum outreach, but to recognize the inevitability of leadership coming from somewhat more favored advocates, and not permitting the issue to paralyze decision-making or action.

2 The sense has been very strong that a Social Forum should not attempt to reach agreement on a single statement of principles or agenda for action, and risk losing members with common interests and willingness to coalesce in an open forum where multiple positions could be represented, without any being excluded. Yet there was also a strong feeling that it would be good to link the forums to action, to have concrete results emerge from them.

Comment: A critical point (see more below). But whatever the conclusion, there are obviously some common agreements that are necessary for any organization, or even

8 There has also been a Mid-West Social Forum, 4-5 June 2004, apparently similar to the Boston Forum, with 4,000 attendees and 550 workshops (message from Bob Mast, Portside, 4 August 2004), and there may have been others of which I am not aware.
Debate or meeting, to take place. The World Social Forum does indeed have a general statement of principles. Its opening paragraph states:

The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth.  

Debate about such should be healthy, even if the result is a lowest common denominator statement that can be refined as time goes on.

3 Global, cross-national perspectives were presented as essential to any Forum; if a New England Regional Forum were to be held, for instance, it should include Eastern Canada as well, to stress the global aspect, and the rejection of narrow national foci, national elitism, ignorance of cross-national forces and consequences.

Comment: A correct, but dangerous, generality. While it is true that all problems are globally linked and neither accounted for nor confined to national borders, the effective vehicle for democratic public action remains at the national level. Even on directly global issues, involving international organizations — the WTO, the World Bank, the IMG, the United Nations — what happens is determined by the positions of national governments participating in these institutions. The most advanced cross-national democratic institution at this time is probably the European Parliament, but it is essentially powerless without the support of the member nations of the EU. While a global context is indeed essential for understanding issues and framing policy, and while limited direct action at the international level, e.g. Seattle, Genoa, Cancun, are important, ultimately the decisive actions will be those of national governments, both internally and acting with other national governments. To the extent the focus is on action, national targets remains critical.

Long-range, what then is the perspective of the social forums as continuations in the line of social movements? (Whether that is the appropriate context in which to look at them is taken up at the end.) Are they ultimately viable vehicles to achieve social change, as the most restrictive definition of social movements had originally considered a sine qua non for a genuine urban social movement? I see two difficulties in visualizing this.

First, there is the political problem. When all is said and done, basic social change requires a shift in power, on at least a national if not international level. That can only be achieved by government. Changes in government can be accomplished by a variety of means, of which the electoral is only one; but in the end the power of government needs to be moved from its present holders to the dispossessed. Yet the social forums are almost intuitively anti-governmental, focused on direct grass-roots efforts, protest movements rather than movements seeking power. Historically, successful social movements have always been essentially single-issue movements, and impacting on single issues affects the distribution of power — but it does not achieve a general redistribution of either power or wealth. At least at this point it does not seem that the social forums approach is likely to deal directly with the political relations of power.

Second, there is the problem of direct democracy. Given that the aims of social forums are multiple-issue aims (even if strategically concrete targets are chosen for each, as

9 The further Statement spells out some of these points, and deals with organizational questions as well. It was approved and adopted in São Paulo on 9 April 2001, by the organizations that make up the world social forum organizing committee, approved with modifications by the World Social Forum International Council on 10 June 2001 (www.nycsocialforum.org/nycsf.html).

10 E.g. Manuel Castells (1972). But see the extensive discussion around this definition, from which Castells himself later retreated, in Pickvance, Mayer and others.
suggested above), how is a platform dealing concretely with multiple issues to be achieved, given both ideological differences and concrete differences of priorities? And is not the problem infinitely more confounded if the process is to be both international and participatory democratic, that is, without hierarchical decision-making? New York has offered some interesting experiences in involving thousands of people directly in a single decision-making process, around proposals for the World Trade Center site at the Listening to the City session in its convention center. But that was only 5,000 people, and on a single issue, and with real limits even there. Is it possible at the vastly greater level of the World Social Forums, with 50,000 people and growing, and at that barely representative of all the groups for whom it hopes to speak? Would not ultimately some form of representative decision-making be required? And how can that be legitimated, in the absence of national democratic procedures not now on the horizon?\textsuperscript{11}

Does major, transformative social change then disappear from the horizon of social movements altogether? Two conditions might be necessary to avoid that conclusion, one within popular control, the other not. One is the constant and consistent linking of all of the issues on which day-to-day struggles are waged, the constant and consistent naming of the underlying system that accounts for them: a constant harping on the themes of commodification, exploitation, domination, oppression, locally and globally. The other is a weakening of that system, a crisis, perhaps economic, perhaps social, perhaps political, that opens the door, and people’s mind, to the thought that Another World is indeed both possible and desirable. If the two come together, there may indeed be the answer to both the political and the direct democracy questions raised above; the focus will indeed turn to considerations of power overall, with government at the center, and immediate decision-making within the movement will be single issue: changing the system.

But all this begs the question with which we began: are the social forums a continuation of the line of social movements in a post-industrial, globalized world? Clearly the forums themselves, despite the complaints of some at the Boston Social Forum that action was missing, do not see themselves as the precipitators or organizers of action. Their statements of principle as, brief as they may be, are clear on the point: they do not strive for agreement, for resolution, but wish to be a forum for open exchange and discussion. And there is a need for such a role. Given the two objections described above, and their own view of their role, the answer must be that the Forums themselves are not social movements, nor wish to be. Perhaps it is too early to talk of a global social movement, a multi-issue international movement that not only struggles for limited objectives but also deals directly with issues of power and social justice as a whole.

But then, are the Forums irrelevant to those many social movements that do exist and are active, often internationally: of the landless, squatters, those demanding water, security of tenure, environmental justice, freedom from exploitation and oppression? I think not, and the answer lies in a strategy that does not consider the forums as themselves social movements, but as aids in the widening, linking, informing of such movements, and perhaps beyond that in helping such movements organize, clarify focus and implement strategies.

How might this be done, beyond what is already being done? Networking certainly is already accomplished at the Forums, and ideas are already exchanged. But more might be possible.

Three possible next steps:

1 Short-range, the next step could be to develop a way in which to link the forums to immediate action outcomes. The goal of ‘Another world’ is indeed the right goal, and

\textsuperscript{11} As Francis Fukuyama, of The End of History? fame, said with typical arrogance and exaggeration: ‘Democratic institutions that work at the nation-state level don’t work at the global levels. A true global democracy, in which all of the earth’s billions of people actually vote, is an impossible dream’ (\textit{New York Times Book Review}, 25 July 2004: 12). Of course, such a voting arrangement hardly exhausts the meaning of global democracy; the issue Fukuyama raises has not yet been dealt with in satisfactory manner.
Debate

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everything that is done should be done with that ultimate goal in mind. But it will not be achieved as the next step; revolution is not on the agenda today, and ultimately the types of changes most participants in the forums desire require changes that are revolutionary. But there are immediate goals that are indeed on the agenda, or can be successfully put there. The Boston Forum highlighted one of those, with the slogan: Water for People, not for Profit. That is an immediate demand; it resonates in many countries, developed and less developed; battles around water privatization can be clear-cut, the actions needed are known, the moral issues should have wide appeal. There is no reason a Forum could not agree, and agree explicitly, around a statement on the Right to Water, and discuss how to organize and fight on the issue, how to make links with other groups, how to analyze, propagandize, educate, on it.

There is no reason why a forum could not in this way take positions on a number of issues, and advance organization on each. In Porto Alegre, the issue of land for the landless might have been a similar unifying issue; debt relief might be another; security of tenure another; universal health care another. In Quito, a campaign for Zero Evictions was proposed. The New York Social Forum is considering using participatory budgeting and mayoral campaign issues as a focus. Developing such a focus (or multiple concrete foci) for a given Forum might solve another problem also: the direct involvement of grass-roots people. While ‘globalization’ or ‘privatization’ or ‘civil liberties’ as general concepts might not be directly experienced as issues by many (even though in reality they are strongly affected), lack of water, denial of citizenship rights, evictions, disease, are felt directly, and if Forums, along with their more general issues, offered direct analyses, workshops, outreach, on these bread and butter issues, the grass-roots response might be substantial. The Boston Forum may have taken a step in such a direction around issues of immigration, and perhaps others.

Urban issues, on the other hand, with the possible exception of homelessness, were not prominent in this Forum. That seems strange; in other Forums, i.e. The Americas Social Forum in Quito, July 2004, one highlighted result was the drafting of a Charter for the Right to the City, and urban issues have been prominent in other Social Forums. On the other hand, ‘urban’ does encompass all of the pressing concerns of the poor, and, even if broadly conceived, excludes some. Perhaps for future Forums the planning process might democratically resolve on two or three or four issues to highlight, with tracks around them ending in statements of principles and organizing strategies, to be decided by those directly involved. And they might well be geared directly to the interests of those in the host community of the Forum.

Other specifics might be considered. One is to take the idea of the tracks, the administrative device along which sessions and panels are arranged, and take them seriously as substantive areas around which there is concern and already organization. Today, in many Forums, tracks are simply constituted based on the apparent congruence of papers or sessions proposed for the Forum. But they might be given greater importance, and selected on the basis of whether there are within or related to the full-fledged or incipient social movements already active. The setting of the Forums might then be used to bring the participants in each track together, to, track by track, strive for agreement on principles and organizing and political strategies on the substantive area of that track. There is, for instance, in the area I know best,

12 Sometimes, indeed, to the exclusion of other issues, e.g. rural issues, land, national policies, economic issues, international issues. There will be explicit discussion of that question at the International Alliance of Habitants sessions at the World Urban Forum in Barcelona in September 2004.

13 The Charter for the Right to the City, for instance, defines ‘city’ as ‘any town, city, capital, locality, suburb, settlement or similar which is institutionally organized as a local unit of government . . .’ (Article 1), a plausible definition, given its purpose. But it would exclude, for instance, the Second Latin American Congress of Rural Organizations (Congreso Latinoamericano de Organizaciones del Campo, CLOC) that took place in Brazil 3-7 November 1997 (see www.zena.secureforum.com/Znet/zmag/articles/petrasoct98.htm).
housing and perhaps urban problems, no single place where the multiple movements already active can come together on an international or even regional level to hammer our principles and strategies. At each Forum each ‘track’ might be asked to move towards synthesis and towards agreement on action.

Many examples exist, generally as a sort of ‘sub-forum’ with broader Social Forums. For instance, in Quito there was a summit meeting of Indigenous Peoples and Nations, and a Latin American Meeting of Urban Movements.14

Another idea might be to take the idea of merging cross-cutting issues, of the unity of the majority of peoples, of those oppressed or exploited in multiple ways but because of similar systemic patterns, and bring them together at each Forum on a geographical basis. Probably many people from each geographical area: country, region, city, already know each other and work together, but experience suggests this is not always true. In many cases, people from the same area, but working on different issues, do not know each other, and have no institutional way of getting together, comparing notes, developing unified strategies. Networking at Forums helps, but is a little hit or miss. Forums could offer an organized way to bring people together, along lines defined by really existing political boundaries, and Forums could help sponsor meetings by each political unit to hammer out a solid and mutually understood agreement on the goals of the otherwise independent tracks in that unit.15

In the very long run (barring a crisis in the established order) it is possible that the groupings/movements represented at the Forums might coalesce around a single set of demands, most plausibly a political platform, pressed internationally in diverse ways and with diverse details in different countries. The level of generality of such a program will need to be hammered out: too general, and it would be toothless; too specific, and it would not apply to many participants. Whether the Forum structure would permit such a development is open to question,16 yet no other is in the offing.

So the Social Forums today and tomorrow can make a major contribution to the goals of the social movements represented within it, even though they are themselves not (yet?) the nucleus of a world-wide social movement. That would mean they would continue to work under the banner of all social movements in the past: improving the lives of the majority of the people, in cities and rural areas, wherever the need exists.17 The possibilities and drawbacks deserve wide discussion.

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References


15 The New York City Social Forum may be heading in this direction already, and the proposal to develop a unified stance for a program for the coming municipal election might be one result.

16 Michael Albert has suggested that World Social Forums might become bodies of representatives from regional Forums, for instance (see his article at tab SF theory at www.nycsocialforum.org/nycsf.html). At the same tab, Pablo Ortellado suggests autonomous groups attend but in parallel sessions, ‘contaminating’ the bureaucratic structure of the World Social Forums.

17 For further discussions of the possibilities and limits of Social Forums, see the references under tab SF ‘theory’ at www.nycsocialforum.org/nycsf.html and at tab for library of alternatives at www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=13&cd_language=2.
### Appendix – The organizing tracks of the Social Forum panels

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By contrast, the European social Forum in London has six ‘Axes’, themes:

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